

## Editorial

### Picture acts and visual politics

Roswitha Breckner · Andreas Pribersky

© Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden 2016

The perception of politics and society appears to be deeply affected by their visual representation. This seems especially obvious under contemporary living conditions, taking into consideration the common use of electronic (mass) media and the importance of pictorials for their control as well as in regard to their content. Attention and awareness in contemporary politics and society are to an important part based on visual strategies. Hence, the reconstruction of these strategies in several fields of political and social relations is the topic of the contributions to this edition.

To place visuals in the focus of research and analysis seems nevertheless not yet common or self-evident in Social Sciences. The so-called Visual or Pictorial Turn (Mitchell 1994) – following the Linguistic Turn of the sixties and the Cultural Turn of the eighties – had up to now a far stronger impact on Cultural Sciences, Philosophy and History than on the Social Sciences. Let us therefore briefly recall some of the key concepts that can be considered as points of reference and as common ground. This brief recall should also allow for a better understanding of the positioning of the contributions to this journal against their methodological and theoretical background.

Visual approaches in Social Sciences pay special attention to the role of images for the constitution of societies and their political representation in general (Bernhardt et al. 2009; Raab 2008, 2014), and to (political) communication in mediatised worlds in particular. Social and political practices that rely on vision, pictorial presentation and representation, image production, iconic styles, iconographic tra-

---

R. Breckner (✉)

Institut für Soziologie, Universität Wien, Rooseveltplatz 2, 1090 Wien, Österreich  
E-Mail: [roswitha.breckner@univie.ac.at](mailto:roswitha.breckner@univie.ac.at)

A. Pribersky

Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Universität Wien, Universitätsstraße 7/2, 1010 Wien, Österreich  
E-Mail: [andreas.pribersky@univie.ac.at](mailto:andreas.pribersky@univie.ac.at)

ditions and media technologies – often considered as an epiphenomenon of social structure or linguistic patterns – move to the centre of analysis. Depictions are not considered a mere illustration, but create meaning in a specific way (Boehm 2007) interconnected with language, text and other forms of symbolisation (Cassirer 1944; Mitchell 1994). On this common ground, Visual Studies, Image Science, Political Iconography and Visual Sociology have vividly developed as cross-disciplinary research areas during the last thirty years.

Theories and concepts that have evolved from these areas address at large, on the one hand, processes of the constitution and perpetuation of social, religious and political communities and states, including the representations of conflicts and wars in a diachronic and contemporary perspective (Fleckner et al. 2011; Bredekamp 2010); on the other hand, they focus on pictorials as an essential part of world views that are performatively shaped in ritualised situations in which a social order emerges, is reproduced and transformed (Goffman 1981; Raab 2014). Furthermore, the shift to digital communication has called for concepts that deal with the question of new forms and technologies of image production, reception and circulation that have affected communication in general, and political communication in particular (Müller and Geise 2015; Lobinger and Geise 2015).

The contributions collected for this journal reflect these different approaches. Being all based on original research, they allow for an understanding of their application to heterogeneous visual practices and artefacts. With a common focus on visual strategies via mass media, campaigns and image material, they are meant to offer an insight into ongoing research of rising scholars and recent developments of the field.

Starting with an analysis of the Band Pussy Riot's 'Punk-Prayer'-performance in Moscows Christ Redemption cathedral during 2012 Russian presidential election, Maria Stanisavljevic inquires the video-footage of this event that has been predominantly popularised in the Western media, addressing the question about the nature of political protest and its challenges and solutions under the condition of mass media communication. Following the concept of video hermeneutics developed by Jürgen Raab (2008), her paper is based first on a thorough interpretation of the visual characteristics of the Punk-Prayer-Action-Video, as well as of pictorial responses in different media contexts. By relating these results to predominant concepts and empirical findings on political protest, and by combining sociological systems theory and theories of knowledge, Maria Stanisavljevic carves out the crucial elements that constitute the phenomenon of political protest in contrast to other social phenomena, and shows why its visualisation in mass media is essential for its dynamics and effect. The distinction between the violation of aesthetic norms and ethical principles in processes of radicalisation is an essential outcome which helps to distinguish contrasting forms of political protest and action.

The second contribution undertakes the challenging task to analyse visual communication strategies of the so-called Islamic State with a focus on the propaganda video clips and messages periodically disseminated through the Web. Global media make regular use of this material and the controversial debate about its broadcasting and reproduction necessitates a closer look, which Petra Bernhardt undertakes on the basis of a visual frame analysis. Her study shifts from the common focus on

the violent images transmitted through these videos and analyses the representation of violence in respect to its visualisation purpose (Bildstrategien). It furthermore relates these prominent details to a broader communication strategy that attempts to represent “everyday life” in the so-called califate – thereby gathering a better insight into the pervasiveness of the IS-image construction and contributing to a basis for criteria for the public use of this material.

Based on concepts of the ‘intrinsic logic of cities’ (Berking/Löw) and the relevance of images of the city to orientate ourselves in everyday life (Strauss), Johannes Marent examines in depth, by means of Visual Segment Analysis (Breckner 2010), a picture that was produced in the image campaign ‘Istanbul 2010: European Capital of Culture’. He unfolds the symbolic references implicitly made by colours, the choice, compilations and retouches of the motif, the graphic styles of the accompanying text and altogether by the composition of the whole image-text. As a result, he argues that a nostalgic orientalist view is activated in a ‘Western perspective’, while the (re-)claim of political power based in tradition and religion becomes immediately apparent only for those familiar with the attempts of the ruling *Justice and Development Party* (AKP) of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to extend political power over the cultural field. Marent concludes that this image activated different visions of the past which address the Western public and follow the political agenda of the ruling AKP at the same time.

Another kind of a mainly implicit image action forms the subject of the contribution by Heike Kanter. Following the documentary method of Ralf Bohnsack (Bohnsack and Przyborski 2015), she reconstructs how the appearance of differently cropped and contextualised pictures of the encounter of two politicians, Angela Merkel and Sigmar Gabriel, in three different newspapers produce and reproduce different visions of politics which are deeply embedded in the habitualised and collectively shared world view of the respective newspaper.

Intrinsic picture acts in another field of politics are the topic of the last contribution. It attempts to react on the widely used category of populism as a comprehensive term for the recent important growth of political parties that share the claim for an authentic and direct representation of the voters or the whole of nation: Elsa Gimenez and Natalie Schwarz undertake a comparative reconstruction of the *Schweizer Volkspartei* and the *French Front Nationals*’ visual representation of the ‘people’ and the relation of party representatives to their voters. On the basis of a visual discourse analysis of the two parties’ Web presentations, they show important differences between their visual strategies that question the englobing concept of populism: the analysis reveals a distinctive image of their respective political role and the national social and symbolic regime they (re)present.

The idea for this edition emerged as a follow-up of a panel at the Austrian Day of Political Science in November 2014 in Vienna, convened by the editors, that has proven a satisfactory experience of mutual exchange and discussion between sociologists and political scientists. We thank the editors of the Austrian Journal for Sociology for their spontaneous and amiable adoption of our proposition and owe our special thanks to the reviewers of the papers for their rapid and precise statements. Last but not least, we thank the contributors for their friendly and accurate cooperation.

## References

- Bernhardt, Petra, Leila Hadj-Abdou, Karin Liebhart, and Andreas Pribersky. 2009. *EUropäische Bildpolitiken*. Wien: Facultas.
- Boehm, Gottfried. 2007. *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen. Die Macht des Zeigens*. Berlin: Berlin University Press.
- Bohnsack, Ralf, and Aglaja Przyborski. 2015. Pose, Lifestyle und Habitus in der Ikonik. In *Dokumentarische Bildinterpretation. Methodologie und Forschungspraxis*, ed. Ralf Bohnsack, Burkard Michel, Aglaja Przyborski, 343–363. Opladen/Berlin/Toronto: Barbara Budrich.
- Breckner, Roswitha. 2010. *Sozialtheorie des Bildes. Zur interpretativen Analyse von Bildern und Fotografien*. Bielefeld: transcript.
- Bredenkamp, Horst. 2010. *Theorie des Bildakts*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Cassirer, Ernst. 1944. *Versuch über den Menschen. Einführung in eine Philosophie der Kultur*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.
- Fleckner, Uwe, Martin Warnke, and Hendrik Ziegler (eds.). 2011. *Handbuch der politischen Ikonographie*. München: Beck. 2 Bände.
- Goffman, Erving. 1981. *Geschlecht und Werbung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Lobinger, Katharina, and Stephanie Geise (eds.). 2015. *Visualisierung – Mediatisierung. Bildliche Kommunikation und bildliches Handeln in mediatisierten Gesellschaften*. Köln: Herbert von Halem.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. 1994. *Picture theory*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Müller, Marion, and Stephanie Geise. 2015. *Grundlagen der Visuellen Kommunikation*. Konstanz: UVK.
- Raab, Jürgen. 2008. *Visuelle Wissenssoziologie. Theoretische Konzeption und materiale Analysen*. Konstanz: UVK.
- Raab, Jürgen. 2014. Bildpolitik. Zur Präsentation und Repräsentation politischer Weltbilder in symbolischen Formen und rituellen Ordnungen. In *Hermeneutik als Lebenspraxis*, ed. Ronald Hitzler, 346–363. Weinheim & Basel: Beltz Juventa.

**Roswitha Breckner** is Associate Professor at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Vienna and spokesperson of the Main Area of Research ‘Visual Studies in Social Sciences’ of the Faculty of Social Sciences (<http://sowi.univie.ac.at/en/research/main-areas-of-research/visual-studies-in-social-science/>). Her current research interest focuses on visual communication in Social Networks from a biographical perspective. <http://www.soz.univie.ac.at/roswitha-breckner>.

**Andreas Pribersky** is Senior Researcher at the Institute of Political Science of the University of Vienna and member of the research group ‘Visual Studies in Social Sciences’ of the Faculty of Social Sciences. He was visiting professor at the Institut d’Études Politiques Lyon (2006) and the University of New Orleans (2008/9). His current research interest focuses on Visual and Symbolic politics and Political Architecture.